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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [CH](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: CARITAS IN CHINA: QUIETLY GROWING

REF: VATICAN 0030

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: A March 6-7 Vatican-hosted Caritas Internationalis meeting on China revealed that Caritas is making small but significant strides in providing support to the Chinese poor with the tacit approval of some local Chinese officials. While there will be no immediate move to establish a national-level Caritas China, Caritas Internationalis will continue to support and build its "discreetly" run diocesan-level Caritas organizations to provide needed social services. The meeting, attended by Bishop of Hong Kong Cardinal Zen and other Vatican-affiliated China experts, took place during a period on increased focus on China matters within the Vatican including the Holy See's preparations to send a letter to Chinese Catholics outlining its vision for the Chinese Church (Ref A and septel). End Summary

Caritas Meets in Vatican to Discuss China

12. (C) The Vatican hosted a Caritas Internationalis (CI) meeting March 6-7 that included representatives from four Chinese dioceses including Cardinal Joseph Ze-kiun Zen of Hong Kong. The purpose of the meeting was to organize and plan CI activities within China with an eye toward increasing the level of social service support to the Chinese people. The general sense of the meeting's participants was that while the time has not yet come for the establishment of a Caritas China, there is a growing number of diocesan-level Caritas agencies providing much-needed services to the Chinese poor - assistance which is not only tolerated but encouraged by some local government officials in parts of China.

Caritas More Active in Mainland China

13. (U) Caritas Macau, Caritas Hong Kong and Caritas Taiwan are all active in mainland China along with the Maryknolls (an order of Catholic missionary priests), Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. Bishops Overseas Development and Relief Agency, and the French Catholic Committee Against Hunger and for Development. Catholic mainland dioceses have established and are developing local Caritas organizations with the assistance of these agencies. According to Cardinal Zen, Caritas agencies are found in dioceses "where the bishop is really in charge, which gives a guarantee that it functions like a Caritas should."

Local Chinese Governments Favorably Disposed to Caritas

¶4. (U) While the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (PA) maintains a firm grip on Church-related matters at the national level, Caritas has made inroads with local governments who look favorably on the Caritas-established diocesan social service centers. According to participants at the March 6-7 Vatican meeting, the centers have good relations with Party authorities in the regions where they operate because the authorities recognize that the centers do provide needed assistance.

¶5. (U) Cardinal Zen indicated that local government authorities have invited the various agencies to help the elderly, people with mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and Hansen's diseases. The local Caritas organizations have also helped dig wells, distribute seeds and train farmers in sustainable agriculture. In one instance, said a meeting participant, a local government even asked the staff of a Catholic home for the elderly to train the staff of a government home.

The Future of China Caritas

¶6. (C) According to a CI official, it will be impossible to establish a national Caritas China before a unified Chinese Bishops Conference is held signaling the PA and underground Church in China have been unified. At present, Caritas has established a special rule allowing Caritas Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan to have membership in CI. If the Bishops Conference issue were resolved (which would be a seminal moment in the history of the Catholic Church in China), a single Caritas China would be the federated member and Caritas Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan will become diocesan level offices. The meeting participants agreed to hold a China Caritas platform meeting on an annual basis at the Vatican. There was also talk of inviting the PA to attend the next platform meeting as a sign of transparency. In that case, the meeting would necessarily have to be held outside Vatican City or its properties, as it would provide mixed signals otherwise.

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Comment

¶7. (C) The Caritas meeting was significant as the Church sees involvement in social services as its best point of access to the public square (see, for example, recent strides in Vietnam).

If the Church and religious personnel prove themselves to be useful in fighting poverty and health problems, the Holy See believes that it will allow for more space for the Church to operate on more purely religious themes. The meeting drew a host of China experts, including Cardinal Zen, signaling the importance the Holy See places on the topic. The Holy See is also currently preparing a letter to Chinese Catholics outlining its vision for the Chinese Church. See reftel and septel.

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